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Same Food as Self Care: A Community Perspective on Autistic People's Relationships with Same Foods

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Abstract

Autistic people often have strong, enduring preferences for specific 'same foods'. These foods are eaten repeatedly due to sensory, emotional, or practical benefits. While such eating patterns have been discussed in research, they are frequently framed through a deficit lens and rarely centre Autistic perspectives. This article reports on community perspectives revealed during the 'Same Food as Self Care' workshops that were designed and led by Autistic professionals and delivered to Autistic adults in both online and in-person formats. The sessions explored participants' same food experiences through discussion, creative reflection, and self-advocacy activities. Thematic analysis of participant contributions and a post-session survey revealed four key themes: (1) same foods as vital for emotional regulation, stability, and joy; (2) increased community connectedness and reduced isolation through shared experiences; (3) limited access to affirming support and professional understanding regarding Autistic eating patterns; and (4) same foods as a practical and intentional form of self-care. These findings challenge deficit-based interpretations of Autistic eating and highlight the value of same foods as a natural and supportive feature of Autistic life.

For many participants, these workshops represented the first time they had discussed their food experiences as Autistic people. This underscored the importance of creating more opportunities for community exploration of these topics. Furthermore, the Autistic adults were able to discuss together how their same foods meet their nutritional, regulation and overall wellbeing needs. Therefore, when professional input around food and eating is needed, we suggest that practitioners could expand their curiosity on the role that this prevalent community trait may have on individuals. Moreover, as these insights from adults were based on free workshops and not from a formal academic study, we suggest that Autistic people's experiences of food requires future research.

Keywords: Same food, Autistic, Autistic community, Autistic Self-care, Autism and food

1. Introduction

Being Autistic is an all-encompassing experience and way of being (Davies, 2022; Milton, 2017). This means that we bring our ways of thinking, needs and abilities to all activities that we engage in. Additionally, this includes food sourcing, preparation and eating. We therefore have unique behaviours and shared experiences with food that constitute a significant part of Autistic culture

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(Farahar, 2022). Autistic ways of eating can also be a source of expression, joy and belonging (Rose, 2025). The diversity of these experiences are reflected across the Autistic community, as described by many individuals personal accounts (Boren, 2022; Lynch, 2019). One specific and widely recognised example of this is the concept of same food.

When Autistic community members discuss same food, they are often referring to a favourite food that they have a strong emotional connection to (Stephenson et al., 2024). These foods are described as being "staples in a person's diet, providing a sense of stability and enjoyment, especially for those with sensory sensitivities or a need for routine in their eating habits" (Hellfeld, 2025). Furthermore, to eat and be nourished, feeling safe and regulated is essential (Klein, 2024). When we discuss same foods in this article, we are describing a multi-faceted experience in the Autistic community that serves different functions for each person. These foods may accompany an Autistic person's meals every day, or they could be snacks or foods solely eaten on their own. Autistic people's preferences for same foods have been discussed in academic literature over the years; however this has largely been framed through a deficit-lens (Cermak et al., 2010; Marí-Bauset et al., 2014). Additionally, the perspective of the community is rarely considered in publications regarding food and eating.

Moreover, numerous Autistic academics and advocates have pushed for a shift towards neuro-affirming practices in line with the neurodiversity paradigm, which conceptualises autism and other neurodivergences as a natural variation in humanity (Kapp, 2020; Pellicano & den Houting, 2022; Walker, 2021). The ethos of neuro-affirming practice focuses on validating an individual's subjective experience as opposed to enforcing neuronormative expectations (Dwyer, 2022; McGreevy et al., 2024). Similarly, we believe that adopting this viewpoint towards Autistic people's relationship with food is also essential. By positioning same food as a natural way of being for Autistic people, this could foster acceptance for this common experience in our community, rather than perceiving it as a deficit that requires fixing.

As two Autistic professionals with our own experiences of same foods, our objective was to ascertain if there was a connection between community member's same foods and their wellbeing. This inspired us to create the 'Same Food as Self Care' workshop at Autscape (2023). Autscape is an Autistic-led conference that offers an affirming space where Autistic people can interact with fellow community members (Belek, 2023). Within this environment, we saw the potential for Autistic adults to feel safe to share and explore their experiences with food through our guided interactive workshop. We later delivered online versions of the workshop through Autistic-led organisations to determine if other adults resonated with the idea of same foods.

This article offers a community perspective on same foods based on the reflections and insights shared from the workshops and a post-session survey following one of the online sessions. Subsequently, we will discuss the implications that these insights could have for professionals, families and Autistic individuals.

2. Methods

We employed a qualitative approach to gather insights from Autistic adults on their experiences of same foods and whether these enhance their wellbeing. This enabled us to explore the subjective accounts of Autistic adults as the heterogeneity of the community means there would be no universal experience of same food. Hence, this resulted in the workshops producing a diverse range of insight and supported participants own construction of their realities of same foods. Furthermore, solidarity and community were central to the workshop delivery by providing participants with a sense of safety to enable them to reflect about and share their same food experiences. We believe that sharing community spaces with Autistic adults would increase this safety for participants. The workshops featured creative exercises and reflective discussions to help elicit adult's insights. These were designed to offer participants a range of ways to contribute to and reflect on the sessions. Additionally, we developed a post-session survey for one of the online workshops wherein participants provided anonymous feedback. This encouraged further reflections from participants following their involvement in the workshop.

Moreover, we conducted a thematic analysis together by reviewing the written data, such as notes and email feedback from participants, drawings and the survey responses we received to determine the main findings. The analysis was inductive as we wanted to discover themes and patterns of adults'

insights as opposed to drawing on any pre-existing data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Additionally, given the lack of literature on Autistic adult's perspectives of same foods, this remains an under-explored topic. Thus, this approach allowed us to capture the authentic experiences of participants' relationships with same foods. Details on the workshops delivery and survey are provided further in the article.

2.1 Workshop Settings, Ethical Considerations & Data Collection

It was important that our workshops were exclusive to Autistic adults through events run by Autistic-led organisations. We believed that facilitating these workshops through well-established groups would allow participants to feel safe in attending and sharing their experiences. The workshops were conducted via an in-person session at Autscape in 2023, followed by online Zoom sessions for Autistic Revolution (AR) and Scottish Women's Autism Network (SWAN) in 2024. For the Autscape session, we submitted a proposal to deliver the workshop at the conference, which was subsequently accepted. Our sessions with AR and SWAN featured online meetings beforehand with the organisation leaders, to ensure the content and delivery of the workshop was safe and appropriate for participants.

Online participants were recruited through social media communication via our own pages and the organisations we collaborated with (see appendix for the advert). Thus, participants registered of their own accord. Autscape's programme allowed for people to attend the workshop on the day without prior registration. AR and SWAN featured an Eventbrite booking page for online participants to register. In terms of numbers of participants, our Autscape workshop was attended by 24 adults, while the AR session featured 21 participants and SWAN's session included 42 participants. Moreover, all sessions were free for adults to attend. We only allowed adults to participate due to potential mentions of individuals sharing examples of when eating is challenging. For the SWAN session, this was exclusive to Autistic women and non-binary people, as this is the population that the organisation supports.

None of the sessions were recorded due to the personal stories shared within them. We did not gather personal details of participants such as age or names. Relatedly, any contributions in this article are focused on same food experiences and do not reveal personal identifiers that could compromise participants identity. Equally, our post-session survey for the SWAN cohort did not ask for any personal details, thereby their privacy was protected. The survey results could only be accessed on Microsoft Forms on an account that was protected by a two-factor authentication. We gathered data at Autscape by asking participants if we could take photos of the images, scripts and words they wrote or drew during the group discussion activities. On our last slide, we included our contact information as an invitation for people to send further feedback or reflections and they were informed that we might share these as anonymous contributions in a writeup in the future. Additionally, some participants from the Autscape and AR sessions emailed us their thoughts after the workshops and provided permission for us to use these quotations in a potential article. For the AR online session, we asked participants if we could save their contributions in the chat box and gather these as anonymous contributions for a future article. Further, the SWAN post-session survey provided anonymous written data from participants who expressed interest in sharing their experiences of same food.

Throughout this article we refer to everyone as 'participants' when sharing input from the adults. Furthermore, we asked for consent from all participants across the workshops for us to share any of their contributions or feedback anonymously into an article. This was obtained by asking in advance of the workshops if people were happy for us to share any contributions in a future writeup. This was repeated at the beginning of the workshops, before we facilitated the group discussions and at the end of the sessions when sharing our contact details. The SWAN organisers also made their members aware that completing the survey may lead to their input being featured in an article. Hence, those who responded to the survey offered implied consent for their input to be shared. No participant explicitly objected to giving consent at Autscape to us taking photos of their contributions or when asking to note chat box input at the online sessions. However, some participants chose not to share their insights or written or creative contributions in the group discussions, thus keeping their views private.

2.2 Workshop Design and Delivery

The Same Food as Self Care workshops were designed and led by ourselves. As Autistic trainers, this helped ensure that both content and delivery were aligned with Autistic communication styles, sensory needs and learning preferences. To support predictability, we shared detailed information before each workshop. For online sessions, this included the session structure, participation options, and suggested materials like creative supplies. For the in-person Autscape event, we provided all the necessary resources to support ease of engagement. Participation was always promoted as invitational, never mandatory. Participants could join in through discussion, creative expression, or quiet observation. We encouraged self-regulation throughout, inviting participants to stim, eat, drink, or take breaks as needed. Our aim was to foster a space where people could engage in ways that felt natural and supportive.

All workshops featured a slideshow that we created on Canva to provide some structure and background on the concept of same food, while also allowing for participants to engage in interactive discussions and activities. As the workshop facilitators, we each chose the specific slides that we would deliver to participants. The Autscape session had three to six people at each table and we walked around the room during the discussion and creative activities to interact with participants. For online sessions, we monitored the chat box throughout and provided participants opportunities to share their own perspectives and respond to the prompt questions on the slides. Online participants were able to unmute to contribute while some preferred to showcase their drawings by turning their video on without spoken input. We gave enough time to ensure everyone who wanted to speak or contribute could. The next section outlines the structure of our slides, prompts and activities in the workshops, both for Autscape and the online versions.

2.2.1 Defining "Same Food"

The sessions all began with a brief slide introducing the concept of same food, the tendency of many Autistic people to eat a familiar food repeatedly. To initiate engagement, participants were asked the following prompt question we featured on the slide: "*What other words come to mind when you hear 'same food'?"*

This prompt question was designed to encourage participants to consider their own relationship with same foods. As we introduced this question on the slide, we shared our own experiences, modelling openness and normalising this eating pattern for the participants.

2.2.2 Exploring Personal Experiences with Same Food

Everyone was then invited to reflect on their own same food experiences by considering the prompt on our next slide: *"What is your same food?"*

Participants were then encouraged to look up an image of their same food or to visualise it. Everyone was later invited to share their same food with the group. For in-person, the participants engaged in small table discussions before sharing thoughts with the larger group. The venue at Autscape provided free Wi-Fi for everyone at the conference, thus participants looked up images by searching on their phone if they chose to do so. Online participants were given the opportunity to look up any images on their own devices while we screen shared the slide with the above prompt on the Zoom sessions. They had the option to respond via the chat function or by unmuting their microphones and choosing whether to be on camera or not to share the image they found.

2.2.3 Creative Reflection Activity

To deepen sensory and emotional connections, we introduced a creative segment to the workshop events. Participants were invited to explore the prompt featured on our next slide:

"What colours, shapes, images, emotions or sounds do you associate with your same food?"

Participants had the option to express their reflections through drawing, writing or simply thinking about their responses. Autscape participants were free to interact with each other as they developed their ideas during this activity. For the online events, we recognised the potential of non-interaction leading to participants feeling unsupported or anxious because of the silence. We therefore planned for this creative time to feature music to maintain connection with participants and build an engaging atmosphere. Additionally, this helped to establish the workshop as a positive and enjoyable time.

An Autistic singer-songwriter who goes by the stage name Amity, performed for one online event while for the SWAN session we suggested participants listen to their own music during this activity if they did not feel comfortable in silence. We approached Amity to express interest in him performing as they are Autistic and would potentially relate to the theme of the workshop. Further, an Autistic performer had the potential of helping participants feel safer in a truly Autistic-led space. Additionally, an optional 'show and tell' invitation was extended to participants. Discussions in-person took place at tables before opening to a full-group conversation. The online participants were given time where they could share in the chat, unmute, showcase their creations on camera or engage silently.

2.2.4 Connecting Same Food to Mental Health

Following the creative reflection activity, we introduced the next slide which guided a discussion on the connection between same food and mental health. This segment built upon participant's own insights and responses shared throughout the workshop. By reflecting on the words, images, emotions and sensory experiences that they associated with same food, participants could provide evidence of its role in self-care, regulation and wellbeing.

2.2.5 Self-Advocacy Through Scripts

For our next slide and section, we aimed to empower participants in navigating meal times and social food situations, thus we introduced practical scripts for self-advocacy. The theme of Autscape 2023 was 'Advocacy and Autonomy', therefore these scripts were designed to help Autistic individuals communicate their food preferences and needs in different settings while reducing stress and social pressure. Subsequently, we continued this theme and activity with the online sessions. Moreover, the stigma that Autistic people experience in society may make self-advocating more difficult (Han et al., 2022; Turnock et al., 2022). Relatedly, long-term experiences of masking can add to the challenges in individuals disclosing their needs (Pearson & Rose, 2021). Thus, we provided concrete examples across three common scenarios for this activity:

Self-talk: *"I've had a really stressful day, and I need to eat something familiar."*

At a restaurant: *"Excuse me... Could I please have this without...?"*

Family gatherings or parties: *"I'd like to come, and I'll bring my own food."*

We chose these three scenarios as anecdotally; we often hear in the Autistic community that there is difficulty with self-talk about food needs. Likewise, communicating and expressing needs in public and group settings is challenging for numerous Autistic people (de Marchena et al., 2025; Oldenburg, et al., 2026). Therefore, we hoped this activity would validate individuals' experiences while also providing them the opportunity to create personalised scripts that they could refer to for these situations. Through this, participants were encouraged to reflect on situations where they had felt discomfort around food and think about what they might want to say in those moments. Participants had the option to share their ideas with the group, either through discussions as a group for in-person or using the chat or unmuting to speak during the online sessions.

2.2.6 Capturing Participant Reflections Through Online Survey

Following the session hosted for the SWAN participants, a voluntary online survey through Microsoft Forms was developed to gather feedback and assess how the workshop and discussions about same food resonated with participants. This consisted of seven questions that were designed to verify attendance and collect qualitative insights of participants' experiences, reflections and any potential changes in their perspectives.

3. Results & Main Findings

The following section details the insights (email feedback, Zoom chat messages, script examples, drawings) shared by participants from the workshops, in addition to input from the post-session survey with SWAN participants. Additionally, we outline the main themes resulting from these findings.

3.1 Descriptions and Meanings of Same Foods

Participants at the Autscape and AR sessions shared written notes and chat messages that described their same foods using a range of words that reflected emotional, sensory, and psychological significance. Common descriptors included: 'soothing', 'escapism', 'co-regulation', 'reliability', 'familiarity', 'embrace', 'stability', 'consistency', 'self-care', 'security', 'reassuring', 'respite', 'sanctuary', 'calming', 'ease', 'comforting', 'certainty', 'accommodation' and 'nostalgia'.

3.1.1 Personal Narratives and Food Rituals

Participants shared individual accounts of their same foods and the routines surrounding them during the creative activity:

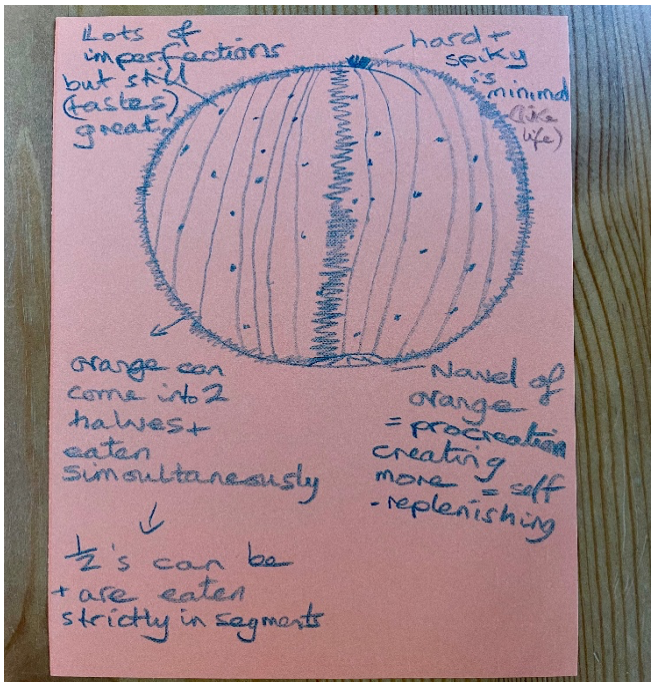
Sardines on Bread: One participant at Autscape reported eating this meal daily for lunch, meticulously preparing it with evenly spread olive oil, evenly spaced sardines, and a sprinkle of pepper. They described it as a vital part of their day, stating, "Life simply wouldn't have the joy it does without this lunch every day."

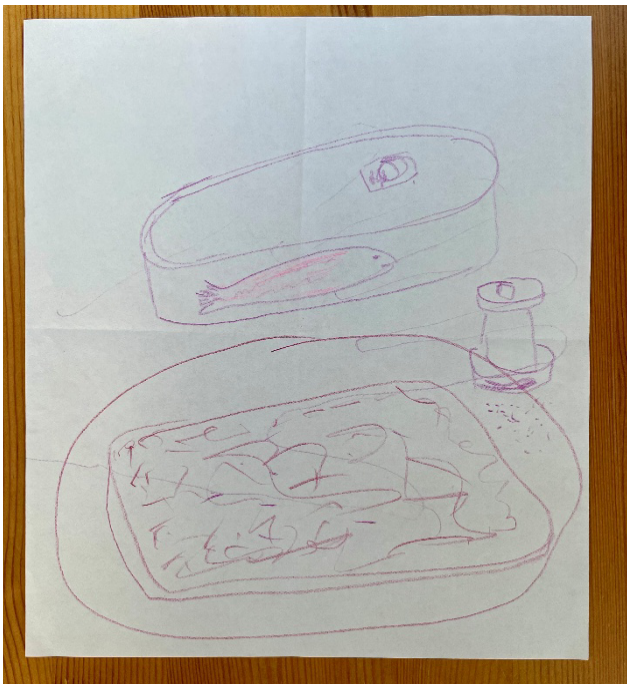
Lentils as a Nutritional and Financial Strategy: Concerned about both health and financial constraints, an Autscape participant adopted lentils as the staple base of most meals. The participant described then adjusting additional ingredients based on availability. This approach allowed them to maintain a consistent dietary foundation while accommodating small variations.

Ferrero Rocher: Another Autscape participant described the multisensory experience of eating Ferrero Rocher, emphasizing the satisfaction derived from unwrapping, consuming the outer layers and reaching the chocolate and the nut at the centre.

Oranges: One Autscape participant shared that they consume oranges daily. They enjoy the precise act of splitting them into equal halves. They expressed distress when the fruit did not separate evenly, emphasising how this detail affected their overall experience. Symbolically, they connected the hard texture of where the stem had separated from the orange to the challenges in life, describing the act of eating as both a ritual and a reflection.

Figure 1: Autscape Participants Drawings of Same Foods





3.1.2 The Role of Same Foods in Health and Wellbeing

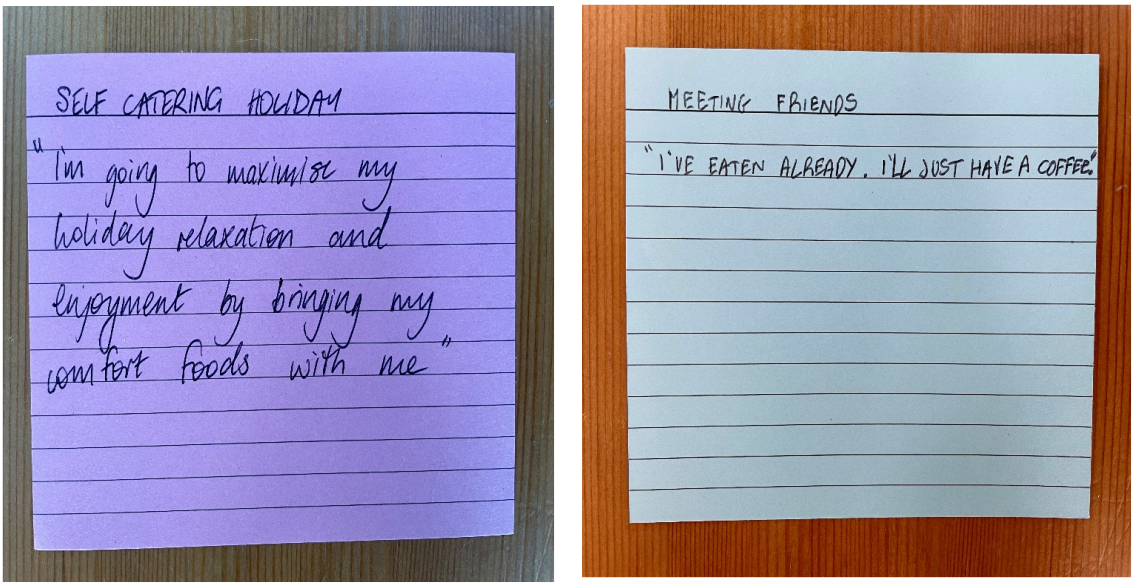
One participant at Autscape sent us an email on how they reconsidered their meal-planning approach after the discussion. They expressed that maintaining a rotating variety of dishes had been overwhelming and speculated that narrowing their meal choices to a consistent set of options could ease decision-making and improve their wellbeing. Specifically, they reflected on how they could learn a set of meals to repeat that met their nutritional and medical needs, thereby minimising overwhelm in meal planning and food sourcing.

3.2 Participant Scripts and Self-Advocacy

Several participants from the Autscape and AR session shared scripts that they had developed for different food-related situations, showcasing strategies for navigating social and practical eating scenarios:

- Self-catering holiday: *"I'm going to maximise my holiday relaxation and enjoyment by bringing my comfort foods with me." – Autscape participant*
- Hotel stays: *"Can I have more teabags, please? I have run out." – AR participant*
- Restaurant interactions: *"Please can I have it without…?"* and *"What ingredients are in the sauce?" – Autscape participant*
- Self-talk strategies: *"Wait a while between courses and check if you're still hungry."* and *"I am looking forward to my dinner." – AR participant*
- Social dining scenarios: *"I've eaten already, I'll just have a coffee." – Autscape participant*
- Decision-making frameworks for ordering food: One Autscape participant realised that they would benefit from looking at a restaurant menu and deciding on choices ahead of going in-person. They created a potential food order plan with preferred options: Plan A (gammon steak), Plan B (macaroni cheese), and Plan C (mild curry).

Figure 2: Autscape Participants Script Examples



3.3 SWAN Survey Responses

A follow-up survey through Microsoft Forms was shared with SWAN participants to assess their experiences and gather additional insights of their reflections on the workshop. The following section outlines the survey questions and some of the responses we received.

3.3.1 Attendance Confirmation: "Did you attend the workshop 'Same Food as Self Care' with Scott Neilson and Laura Hellfeld?"

Thirteen respondents confirmed having attended the *Same Food as Self Care* workshop with SWAN.

3.3.2 Reasons for Attending: "What reason(s) were you interested in attending 'Same Food as Self Care'?"

We asked this question to understand what brought people to the Same Food as Self-Care workshop. We were interested in whether people attended because the topic was particularly relevant or interesting to them, or simply because they regularly take part in SWAN's monthly offerings, or for another reason. Participants attended for various reasons, including personal relevance, self-discovery and a desire for community:

- "I eat the same foods daily but also have a very limited diet."
- "I'm autistic but also have an eating disorder."
- "Self discovery and to feel ok about who I am."
- "I'm an autistic young adult looking to learn more about same foods, and what that means for me."
- "I thought I had an issue with eating same foods all the time I am glad there are others who do the same."
- "I used to criticize myself for struggling with food. This seminar helped me realize it's okay."
- "I wanted to see if other autistic individuals had similar experiences."
- "Recently diagnosed with autism and have binge eating disorder - I thought this would be a useful session to learn more."

3.3.3 Opportunities for Food Discussions: "Have you had a prior opportunity to gather with other Autistic individuals and discuss food and eating?"

We were curious if participants had any previous opportunities to discuss their food and eating experiences with other Autistic people. Eleven respondents indicated they never had an opportunity to discuss food and eating with other Autistic individuals. One noted: "No never, it's been really great, made me feel much less isolated and realise I am not a difficult or annoying person."

Two participants responded 'yes' that they have had the opportunity and it was either "at a SWAN autism support group with neurodivergent friends" or "an EDAC (The Eating Disorders and Autism Collaborative) research project."

3.3.4 Same Foods Reported: "What is/are your same food(s)?"

The next survey question was to learn about the range of same foods that participants reported. These foods included diet coke, chocolate, fizzy water, roast potatoes, salted pretzels, white bread with butter, chicken nuggets, porridge, crisps, chips, fruit and fibre peach yogurt, banana, chicken salad, salmon, curry, ham sandwich, crackers and cheese, lasagne, garlic bread and potatoes, tuna mayo sandwich on white bread, cheesy pasta, oranges, radishes, boiled sweets, cereal and sandwich thins.

One respondent described preparing the same stir-fry batch weekly with precisely measured ingredients, ensuring consistency.

3.3.5 Associations with Same Foods: "What words or phrases come to mind when you think of your same food?"

To connect with the workshop's aim of reflecting on same foods, we asked respondents what came to mind now when thinking about their same foods. Participants associated their same foods with a range of words and emotions:

- "Safe"
- "Routine, safe"
- "Safe, happy, calming"
- "Comforting and safe"
- "Tasty, safe and happy"
- "Comfort food"
- "Calm, joy, cosy, hugged, relaxed and warm"
- "Safe, convenient, healthy, nurturing and nourishing"
- "Safe, happy, comfort, peaceful"
- "Safety, comfort and routine"
- "Security, stability, routine and calming"

One respondent highlighted: "My morning porridge with chocolate gives me the same feeling I had of being around my grandparents - loved, nurtured, cared for."

3.3.6 Takeaways from the Workshop: "What ideas are you taking with you from the 'Same Food as Self Care' workshop?"

Our question was to ascertain if participants learned anything about their experiences of same food or had any changes in their perspectives following participation.

- Many participants expressed relief in discovering that same foods are a shared experience.
- One respondent noted: "That I am not mad!!! There are others like me."
- "I feel less alone, it's really nice to know how many people also have same foods. It was lovely to hear the speakers talk about their own experiences with same foods."
- "That I can eat the same food that I want and there is nothing wrong with it."
- "I enjoyed hearing about other people's same foods which made me feel more 'normal'. My eating habits have always made me feel different so hearing other people's experiences was really validating."

Others highlighted the importance of self-acceptance:

- "Just enjoy being me and enjoy the food that makes me feel nice."
- "That it's ok to have positive self-talk"
- "It's ok to be me"
- "That I can eat the same food that I want and there is nothing wrong with it."
- "It is ok to eat the same foods, I think because I live alone that most people don't really notice that I eat the same food and when they do (i.e. at lunch or something at work) I am made to feel that it's not ok."

3.3.7 Access to Support and Learning: "Do you think Autistic adults receive adequate access to learning about themselves and/or support in regards to food and eating?"

Finally, our last survey question was to understand whether participants felt there was enough access to educational opportunities (particularly from lived experiences) and support about Autistic people's experiences of food and eating.

The majority of respondents felt that Autistic adults do not receive adequate access to support regarding food and eating. Several pointed out a lack of resources and professional awareness, particularly in healthcare settings. One participant stated*:* "Definitely not - much more is needed. I am overwhelmed by how much I suddenly need to learn about myself at age 48 and underwhelmed by the resources available." Another participant stated: "Not at all, I think it would be good to be able to understand better why I eat the way I do and that its part of the lived autistic experience and then it would also be good for society to understand so that we aren't made to feel ashamed of the way we eat/experience food."

3.4. Core Themes

After reviewing the various input shared with us from each event and in the post-session survey with SWAN, we identified four themes from the Autistic adults who participated in the workshops. The following section will provide a thematic analysis of their insights based on us exploring the written notes (script examples, chat messages, email feedback), drawings and survey responses that we received.

3.4.1 Emotional Needs/Mental Health

Participant reflections across each workshop consistently linked same foods with mental health. They described them as essential strategies for emotional regulation, self-soothing, and psychological safety. Words like 'respite', 'security', and 'sanctuary' were used to convey their comforting role during stress or overwhelm. Same foods offered stability, predictability, and control in a world that often feels chaotic or overstimulating.

Participants spoke candidly about the emotional relief of having a space to talk openly about food without judgement. One SWAN participant remarked that the workshop "helped me realise it's okay"

to have consistent eating habits, while another SWAN participant reflected, "It's helped me start to re-frame some of the self-talk I tell myself" and "it was important to start the process of accepting my choices more confidently".

Alongside comfort and stability, joy was a prominent theme in how participants described their same foods. One Autscape participant spoke of their daily lunch of sardines on bread as a vital source of happiness, sharing, "Life simply wouldn't have the joy it does without this lunch every day". Others at the sessions expressed delight in the sensory experiences of their foods which included the pleasure of unwrapping a treat, the satisfaction of a familiar texture, or the calm of a well-practiced routine.

3.4.2 Community Connectedness

Another core theme in the feedback was the strong sense of community that the sessions fostered. Many participants valued hearing about other Autistic adults' experiences with same food, with several attending specifically to explore whether others shared similar patterns. One SWAN participant shared in their survey response, "I thought I had an issue with eating same foods all the time, I'm glad there are others who do the same". Others said the workshop eased feelings of isolation around their food habits. As one SWAN respondent wrote, "It's been really great, made me feel much less isolated and realise I am not a difficult or annoying person".

A participant at Autscape emailed us written feedback, "It was so great to hear from other autistic adults on this subject as everything I have seen is about children". A SWAN participant noted, "I feel less alone, it's nice to know how many people also have same foods". One SWAN participant wrote, "That I am not mad!!! There are others like me" highlighting how this commonality helped reframe self-perceptions. Finally, another SWAN participant described this shared understanding as deeply validating: "I enjoyed hearing about other people's same foods, which made me feel more 'normal'. My eating habits have always made me feel different, so hearing other people's experiences was really validating".

3.4.3 Access to Learning and Support with Food

Most SWAN survey respondents felt that Autistic adults lack adequate support around food and eating. Similarly, many participants during the Autscape and AR sessions highlighted the limited resources and low professional awareness, especially in healthcare, of how Autistic people eat. While two survey respondents mentioned discussing this with SWAN, they noted a lack of similar opportunities elsewhere to explore their experiences.

Across the workshops, many felt professionals need more education on Autistic eating preferences. Several people also stressed the need to centre Autistic voices in these conversations, as they are often excluded from this narrative. One SWAN survey respondent described how current attitudes and policies around Autistic food needs fall short, based on their professional experience:

> In my job as an allied health professional, there are so many policies around school dinners which are not ND affirming and which make children's lives difficult at school, it would be great if the powers that be consulted with the autistic community when making these rules so that they could understand that a child who needs different foods not to be touching isn't naughty or difficult just doing what they need to do to feel safe.

3.4.4 Self-Care

Another key theme from participants' feedback was the link between same foods and self-care. We included this in the workshop title, anticipating that it would prompt reflection on how eating habits may relate to meeting personal needs. Participants frequently mentioned 'routine' when discussing same foods, along with words such as 'stability' and 'security' also appearing in the survey responses. These responses reinforced how the predictable nature of same foods help Autistic adults to maintain balance.

The word 'accommodation' also appeared frequently during discussions, highlighting how same foods help people adapt routines to their needs. One SWAN survey respondent described about preparing



the same stir-fry each week with precisely measured ingredients, ensuring consistency. An Autscape participant shared through their drawing how lentils became their prominent food to support their health and financial concerns. A further example came from another Autscape participant who reconsidered their approach to meal planning. They found rotating meals to be overwhelming and planned to shift toward a smaller set of reliable options that met their dietary and medical needs, thereby reducing decision fatigue.

During the activity focused on scripting self-advocacy statements around food needs, one Autscape participant shared: "I'm going to maximise my holiday relaxation and enjoyment by bringing my comfort foods with me", highlighting the importance of same foods during periods of traveling. Another Autscape participant created a personalised framework for ordering at restaurants to mitigate stress. They realised that they would benefit from viewing a restaurant menu ahead of time, developing a plan of several options to prepare for.

4. Discussion

The Same Food as Self Care workshops fostered community connections, validation, and self-acceptance among Autistic adults. Participants engaged deeply, sharing experiences, developing self-advocacy strategies, and reflecting on how same foods can support wellbeing. The overwhelmingly positive feedback underscores the need for continued conversations and resources on Autistic people's relationships with same food.

Workshop participants reported reduced isolation, echoing research that links Autistic community integration to positive wellbeing outcomes (Cage et al., 2022; Watts et al., 2024). Similarly, research suggests that developing a positive Autistic identity has a considerable influence on improving individuals' mental health (Cooper et al., 2021; Davies et al., 2024). Exploring same foods together helped participants view this aspect of their identity more positively, highlighting the value of dedicated Autistic spaces (Botha et al., 2022; Crompton et al., 2022; Milton & Sims, 2016). The word 'routine' was frequently shared by participants. Routines are known for providing stability for many Autistic people (Petty & Cantwell, 2025). Beardon (2017) coined the concept of 'global stability' to describe how life is largely unstable for Autistic people due to systems and services being misaligned with their needs. Therefore, any elements of routine become essential features of their life to achieve some semblance of balance. Same foods emerged as a key part of these routines for our participants, thereby supporting emotional regulation and reducing anxiety.

Many participants shared that meal planning adaptations supported their food needs, particularly in relation to executive functioning (EF) challenges. These challenges are commonly reported within the Autistic community (St. John et al., 2021). EF difficulties such as task switching, planning, and remembering sequences are often exacerbated by stress and sleep issues, which are also frequently experienced by Autistic people (Halstead et al., 2021; Moseley et al., 2021; Tsai et al., 2021; Whelan et al., 2022). In this context, familiar and predictable foods may serve as a necessary accommodation for Autistic people. Our findings suggest that these food preferences can help to reduce the overwhelm of EF related demands, particularly those linked to the many steps involved in typical meal planning, sourcing and preparation.

During the self-advocacy activity, participants shared various scripts and strategies, reinforcing the diversity of approaches that could work depending on individual needs and environments. Promoting self-advocacy is frequently cited as an essential principle of neuro-affirming practice (Edwards et al., 2025; Shear et al., 2025). The co-creation of these advocacy tools served as a practical conclusion to the workshop, equipping participants with tangible strategies that they could apply in real-life situations. In addition, this also reinforced the broader theme of honouring Autistic food preferences as a form of agency.

The workshops also aligned with the double empathy problem (Milton, 2012), which emphasises that Autistic and non-autistic people experience the world in qualitatively different ways. Based on the findings from our workshops, it seems that Autistic relationships with food could be different from how non-autistic people engage with eating. In accordance with the concept of the double empathy problem, we suggest that Autistic eating preferences are not a disorder or deficit, but are instead a natural variation in experiences of food.

Participants demonstrated strong self-awareness and agency around food. This challenges outdated theories that have historically questioned Autistic people's ability to understand their own thoughts or the thoughts of other people (Williams & Happé, 2009; Yergeau, 2018). This highlights how Autistic people may benefit from more opportunities to explore what they need in relation to their food preferences. Therefore, presuming competence, which is frequently highlighted as a key foundation of neuro-affirming practice (Wise, 2023), is critical in our discussion of the narrative about Autistic people and food. This is equally important when interacting with non-speaking Autistic people, who are often presumed to be incompetent and denied opportunities to communicate their needs (Heyworth et al., 2022).

Stress from the unavailability of same foods was a frequent issue that participants shared. Under a medical model lens, this is usually framed as rigidity among Autistic people (Kinnaird et al., 2019). However, when understanding the internal experiences of Autistic adults, it could be suggested that this stress indicates there is an unmet need. Furthermore, this suggests that interventions that withhold preferred foods may have a negative impact on individuals mental health. This supports a necessary shift towards neuro-affirming models in healthcare (Kapp, 2020; Lerner et al., 2023). Finally, many participants noted a lack of support and widespread misunderstanding from professionals. This mirrors broader findings on societal stigma around Autistic eating (Stephenson et al., 2024), reinforcing the need for education and acceptance of diverse food needs.

5. Limitations of the Workshops

Although the Same Food as Self Care workshop at Autscape was open to all conference attendees and the online sessions were widely advertised, we cannot confirm whether any non-speaking Autistic people participated. This is a key limitation, as non-speaking Autistic individuals face significant barriers to both research and community involvement (Jaswal et al., 2024; Lebenhagen, 2020). We also did not collect demographic data such as age, gender, or ethnicity, limiting our ability to explore how experiences of food and self-care vary. Based on observations, most participants appeared to be white and British, meaning that the responses we received likely do not reflect the full cultural diversity of the Autistic community. Cultural beliefs, practices, and relationships with food vary widely (Nemec, 2020; Sproesser et al., 2022), thus this is an area worthy of exploration.

Furthermore, the online format further restricted access, particularly for learning disabled Autistic individuals who may face digital barriers or require alternative formats and support (Chadwick et al., 2023). Altogether, we had a total number of 87 participants across all the workshops, which is a small reflection of the Autistic community's experiences of same food. Ultimately, our participant groups were relatively homogenous and do not reflect the full range of Autistic experiences. Future work could adopt an intersectional approach, ensuring meaningful inclusion of ethnic minority, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer (LGBTQ+), learning disabled, and non-speaking Autistic individuals. Exploring these intersections is vital to understanding how Autistic people may use food as self-care. Lastly, as we are reporting on insights from our workshops and not formally funded research, it would be beneficial for researchers to explore Autistic people's experiences of same food.

6. Conclusion

Overall, our findings from the workshops highlight ways that Autistic adults experience same foods and how these can be essential for their wellbeing. Equally significant was the way that participants connected with one another during the workshops, often for the first time around this topic. Therefore, future work and research could explore how the foods that Autistic people eat may help to support their daily needs and create opportunities for deeper Autistic community involvement.

Additionally, our workshop findings suggest that many Autistic adults are able to identify why they need to eat the foods they do, with several participants detailing emotional and sensory benefits to these choices. This disputes the claims that Autistic people are unreliable narrators in articulating their lived experiences (Gernsbacher & Yergeau, 2019). Hence, it may be useful for researchers and practitioners to generate more curiosity towards Autistic people's choices with foods, rather than assuming that there is no purpose or reasoning behind their preferences. This would also be aligned



with neuro-affirming practice, through honouring how individuals experience food, as opposed to imposing interventions that attempt to modify their behaviour (Zaks, 2025). Therefore, we encourage collaboration between Autistic people and professionals to co-create food and eating care plans that are respectful and person-led.

Ultimately, recognising same foods as a meaningful form of self-care repositions eating as an area where Autistic people can exercise autonomy, regulation, and comfort. This perspective calls for a shift in how support is offered. One that centres respect, listens to and trusts in Autistic people's own understanding of what they need. As our workshop participants showed, food choices are intentional and often deeply supportive. Embracing this understanding is key to building more compassionate and neuro-affirming approaches to care. We hope that this article has provided valuable insight into our community's unique relationship with same foods and the importance of celebrating this shared experience.

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Appendix: Social Media Advert for the Workshops

In this workshop, attendants will explore the Autistic food trait of 'same food'. Same foods are foods that we have a great attachment to, our personal favourites. We may eat these foods every day in order to bring ourselves routine or comfort.

Participants will be welcomed to draw or look up an image of one of their same foods. For those comfortable, we can share these foods and community moment with one another.
We will then explore our emotional and sensory responses to our chosen same food. Participants will be encouraged to draw or write what emotions, colours, shapes, music (or anything else!) that they feel when thinking of their same food.

We will explore how our same foods therefore provide an important piece to our mental well-being and self-care. Participants will then be guided to create scripts for themselves to help navigate social eating scenarios and advocate their food needs.